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Graduate School and a Life besides: Lessons Learned from My Undergraduate Days

Kendall L. Ferguson, BA

ABSTRACT

This essay describes the expectations and demands placed on one returning student to graduate school who is faced with an array of competing roles. Her reflection on the ups and downs of undergraduate school experiences offers key lessons for persons about to embark on a similar education choice and the lifestyle challenges that it brings.

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While pursuing my undergraduate degrees, I met and subsequently befriended some of the brightest, most wonderful people I had ever had the distinct pleasure of knowing. There was always studying to be done, but there was also always time for friendship and comradery. What I did not realize at the time was that this era was a mere window. It was not as permanent as young 20-year-olds on the docks of Lake Mendota at 2:00 in the morning thought it would be. The summer after graduation was a period of departures. As it turns out, the city one attends college in is not necessarily the city in which one will stay for adulthood. By summer's end, I had no friends left.

The social scene in graduate school is – as it has been explained to me – an entirely different animal from that of the undergraduate world. Graduate programs are comprised mostly of students that work part-time at the very least, are married or living with a significant other, or have come straight from their undergraduate degree and still have roommates they went to college with. Each of these three categories poses a problem when it comes to socialization. Moreover, as I will be attending the part-time Social Work program, my cohort will be those with full-time jobs, and thus, even less available to participate in social gatherings.

Whereas many graduate students may find the biggest hindrance to their social life while completing their degree is simply finding the time to prioritize relationships, I believe the main factor in potential burnout for me will be loneliness. Researchers Emma Seppala and Marissa King have studied the effect of loneliness on workplace burnout – something I believe directly relates to burnout in graduate programs. Seppala and King (2017) found that nearly 50% of those surveyed said they were “often or always exhausted due to work.” They point out that

this is “a 32% increase from two decades ago,” and believe workplace loneliness to be the main contributing factor for the increase. However, they state this loneliness is not due to “social isolation...but rather due to the emotional exhaustion of workplace burnout” (Seppala & King, 2017). I agree with the premise of their research; however, I would instead offer that the conclusion should be more cyclical in nature than simple cause-and-effect.

It should be noted that I have not yet started my graduate program, and as such, am operating mostly on assumptions of others' experiences and hypotheticals. The health risks of loneliness, however, are not assumptions, nor hypotheticals. Loneliness impacts humans deeply, both physically and emotionally. It can reduce lifetime longevity by 70% – a whopping 20% more than smoking – and is related to a 30% increase of coronary heart disease (Pressman et al., 2005; Valtorta et al., 2016). It is also the one area in this essay that I can reflect upon my own experience, and not on the experiences of others.

My first semester of undergraduate education took place in the fall of 2012. I was new to the area, knew no one, was suffering through the resurgence of cancer in my family, and had been broken up with a mere two weeks prior to my move. It was not the perfect storm until I had decided to take a full course load of 18 credits, then: *perfect storm achieved*. I lost 28 pounds by mid-October and professors started to take note of my wan face. Lacking the nutrition necessary to keep up health and grades, I could not shake the constant string of vague illnesses, and I could not achieve the 4.0 grade point average I was used to maintaining with some ease. The culmination of these factors, all driven by excessive loneliness, eventually resulted in a November suicide attempt, and subsequent withdrawal from the semester.

This short personal anecdote lends itself to

reflection and learning. What I once bore with shame, I now carry as a signal and warning to myself. I am deeply affected by loneliness, and must be proactive in my graduate program to counteract my instinct to bury my head in the sand and bear through it. I have sought out student groups I can join for those interested in clinical psychology and healthcare advocacy in a preemptive attack on loneliness, and have lined up the proper support system for my first semester of graduate school.

Another possible pitfall in balancing a graduate program with having a life outside of school is the fact that graduate school lends itself to perfectionists and overachievers. A distinct phenomenon that separates graduate school from other academic undertakings is the unspoken assumption that the syllabus is the bare minimum for success. There is an expectation that you can always do *more*. In addition to the regular assigned coursework, a graduate student in clinical psychology should strive to publish more research, seek out extra field placement assignments, see more clients, and shadow more licensed psychologists. Performing in an arena in which there is no limit is a near impossibility for perfectionist students that struggle to set limits for themselves when faced with perceived mediocrity.

Setting limits has never been my forte. Instead, I am fond of signing on to as many projects as possible, sacrificing sleep and social interactions for work, and careening to the project deadline with wild abandon. This method has taken me through life with good grades and positive workplace evaluations, but it would be unwise to believe this method to be sustainable while balancing the Social Work program with a full-time job, a part-time job, and relationships. I must adapt to the idea of limits and learn how to set them. Self-discipline will play a large role in this endeavor. For the past two months, I have attempted to blossom into a productive morning person in preparation for the coming changes this fall. I attempt to keep a semi-rigorous hourly schedule every day, including those that I have off from work, to train my brain to accept the level of self-accountability I will need to succeed.

Lastly, I believe the biggest challenge in balancing graduate school with outside life will be my perfectionist tendencies. Perfectionism was touched upon earlier in this essay in regards to striving to accomplish as many tasks as possible. More insidious than the need for *more*, however, is the idea that nothing can be accepted if it is not the best. When I look back at my first semester of my undergraduate degree, I understand the match that lit the proverbial dynamite was the fact that I could no longer maintain a perfect 4.0 GPA. I realize now that my perfectionism distorted reality. I was achieving straight B's and one C, grades that were certainly not worth the torment I put myself through. In my last

semester, I scrapped my honors thesis 20-page paper one week before the deadline because I was not satisfied with my conclusions, and thus, not proud of my work. I checked out entirely new resources from the library and wrote a brand new 35-page paper in my last week of undergrad.

These proclivities, although excellent for academic work, do not lend themselves to a positive, healthy life outside of the classroom. As such, I will combat my tendencies by setting a schedule that includes non-academic time to myself, set limits for myself and the requests of others, actively work to lessen the pressure for perfection, and instead, focus on doing what is reasonable. With these parameters set, I believe I can combat the inherent difficulty of pursuing a graduate degree while actively pursuing a healthy life.

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